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ABSTRACT

The author presents a subjective view of the variety of interactions between volunteer counselors and juvenile offenders. This article describes some of the activities shared by the counselors and probationers, and the way in which these shared experiences served to help establish and maintain rapport. The volunteer counselors stress the importance of being able to listen quietly to, and suspend judgment of, the counselee; counter counselee anger and frustration with understanding, acceptance and friendliness; remain patient and come from their own strength as persons. (3J4)

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EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEER COUNSELORS WITH JUVENILE OFFENDERS

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The volunteer counselors of the Portsmouth Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court represent wide ranging skills and experience. They are of varied background and cultural milieu. They are male and female, black and white, young and not-so-young, quiet and extraverted, liberal and conservative, single and married, of strong and not-so-strong religious commitment. These and other diverse personal characteristics set the stage for a variety of interactions between themselves and their juvenile clients. There were very few cross-sex and cross-race assignments of counselor to counselee but almost all interaction crosses socio-economic class lines. 90 percent of the probationers are estimated to be from poverty homes while the volunteers are largely from middle socio-economic groups.

Even though most volunteers considered the training program helpful in preparing them to deal effectively with their clients, many of these new counselors were as uncertain and anxious as their counselees when they began actual contact. Their first efforts were usually relaxed and informal meetings designed to help establish rapport with their new friends.

Many volunteers took their clients to football and basketball games. Others went boating and fishing. Shopping trips, visits to local parks and musical concerts were popular activities among the volunteers and their friends. Many counselors take their clients out to eat and some reported including their clients in church and related activities. There was wide agreement among the volunteers that these casual contacts were beneficial and served to strengthen the relationship.

As well as meeting for specific activities, much counselor-counselee interaction takes place in each others homes. Approximately one third of the volunteers reported visiting their clients in the clients' home. Another third have taken their clients into their homes and involved them with their own children and family activities. Some volunteers expressed concern that bringing their new friends into their homes would in some way cast aspersions upon the juvenile's parents or family. Most found, however, that with balanced contact in both homes and the expression of genuine acceptance and respect that the juveniles did not seem resentful of the counselor's affluency.

The most prominent theme expressed by the volunteers who attended the post workshop share session was that of the necessity of attending to the counselee. They stressed the importance of quietly listening to and suspending judgment of the counselee. Many counselors reported that their counselees seemed to feel that for the first time an adult was actually listening to what they had to say. Some volunteers stated that it was difficult at times to refrain from responding from their own needs and that great patience was needed in order to listen carefully and respond with empathy.

Many experienced difficulty in suspending judgement of their counselees and their behavior, especially when much of the counselee's experience is so alien to the counselor's way of life. Most volunteers found that responding to their clients' feelings and experiences in an empathic and genuinely respectful manner did much to help them understand the experience of and identify with the growth producing aspects of the counselee. Many found it difficult to deal with the aggressiveness and hostility expressed by their clients and their patience and perserverence were tried in countering such angry expressions with understanding, acceptance and friendliness. While such angry encounters were often frustrating for the counselors, most felt that persistent patience often paid off in increased mutual confidence and trust.

Many volunteers emphasized the importance of being kind but firm in the counseling relationship. These counselors experienced the need to come from their own strength in resisting in a firm and caring way their counselees' attempts to test and manipulate them in the relationship. They learned of the frustration associated with their counselees' rejection of genuine caring and friendship and resistance to deal with the self-defeating aspects of their behavior.

Many volunteers found it necessary to set limits on what they could and could not do for the counselee. One counselor reported that his friend came to view him as his exclusive taxi-service until limits were set. Many counselors had to set limits on the kind of behavior they could accept in their counselees. Here they recognized the importance of confronting with caring and kindness in order that the counselee experience rejection not of himself but of his self-defeating behavior.

A volunteer told of the establishment of a relationship of trust and caring with a young adolescent. They visited in each other's homes, played chess and became friends. After a while the boy began missing scheduled appointments. The counselor found it necessary to confront his friend with his feelings of anger and disappointment and pointed out that the relationship required commitments on both their parts. The counselor felt that their confrontation resulted in a stronger relationship of mutual respect and trust.

Other volunteers recognized the importance of their being aware of their own feelings and biases as regards to their clients, their lives, culture, experiences and feelings. Again, the need for patience was emphasized. They realized the importance of personal integrity and congruence in confronting counselees with inconsistencies in their behavior, beliefs, etc. The necessity to confront from a base of understanding and with caring was made more meaningful to the counselors when they began working with their counselees.

Many volunteers stated that the training workshop had helped them to gain a greater degree of self-awareness. As a result of increased self-awareness, many were able to offer a greater degree of self-disclosure to their clients. They felt open to sharing their feelings and experience with their counselees. They found themselves able to share in both a supportive and confrontive way. As they were able to become open to their clients they felt that their clients came to experience them as real, genuine persons rather than "adults," "pigs," or "volunteers".

Many volunteers reported that after a relationship of mutual trust had been established, many of the juveniles were able to deal with problems and concerns with which they could not approach their parents nor probation officer. As a result, many volunteers were able to intervene in a helping way in their friends' environment.

One volunteer made several contacts with his counselee's school, attended meetings with school counselors and teachers, and made himself available to the counselee, school and probation officer. His efforts appeared to pay off in terms of better overall school and life adjustment for the counselee. He was able to give an excellent report to the juvenile's probation officer. The volunteer stated with not a little satisfaction and pride that his friend was released from probation but still called the volunteer on occasion.

Some volunteer counselors were able to help their counselees interact more effectively with their families and in some cases interceded for the client with his parents.

Many volunteers reported the establishment of excellent relationships with their new friends. They were gratified that an atmosphere of trust and mutual sharing was established. Many became quite involved in the lives of their clients' and their families. One reported feeling that she had been accepted as a part of her friend's family. Others have included their counselees

in their own family activities to a great extent. Many counselors found that their counselees called them in times of stress and genuine need. Some counselors reported becoming involved to the extent that they began experiencing feelings of responsibility for their counselees' behavior. This was especially in regards to school performance.

Most of all, volunteers agreed that at one time or another, they had asked themselves, "How did I get into this?" They quickly became aware of the many difficulties involved in just offering oneself as a friend to a juvenile probationer. There was universal agreement that actual counseling was a good deal more difficult than the roleplaying situations encountered in the workshop. Most felt that the training program was helpful and expressed confidence in their ability to be a helpful person to their clients'. They recognize that often it is extremely trying and frustrating and that to be effective as a counselor requires unrelenting patience and perseverance. They seem to remain optimistic in the belief that remaining patient and coming from their own strength as persons will pay off. Even though most volunteers are aware that their time and efforts are only a small part of the counselee's total environment, most have elected to stick with it.

In fact, although they are only committed to spend one hour per week with their clients, approximately one half of the volunteers spend considerably more time.